DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 450 977 RC 022 780

AUTHOR Chaffe, Robert F.
TITLE Moving beyond the Cutting Edge.
PUB DATE 1998-06-00
NOTE 8p.; In: Falk, Ian, Ed. Conference Proceedings of the International Symposium on Learning Communities, Regional Sustainability and the Learning Society (June 13-20, 1998). Launceston, Tasmania, Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, p87-93.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Farmer Education; Change Strategies; *Farm Management; Foreign Countries; Long Range Planning; Rural Development; *Rural Extension; Rural Farm Residents; *Strategic Planning
IDENTIFIERS *Australia (Victoria); Family Farms

ABSTRACT

Following a nationwide drought in 1982, the Australian government instituted the National Property Management Planning program to build skills in the rural community to better manage the farm business, including the need to manage change. In Victoria, the program is delivered through the Farm$mart project. Farm$mart is: learner centered; involves farm families; works with groups that stay together for some time; is led by facilitators dedicated to the project; focuses on the strategic part of the farm family business plan; uses existing providers to undertake skill training; develops effective communication and builds trust within families and groups; builds participant confidence to make hard decisions; and links with other learning experiences and outcomes. Managed by the Victorian Farmers Federation and the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, Farm$mart is delivered on a regional basis and is assisted in each region by steering committees who represent the farming community and include people with skills in adult education and extension. The project consists of an introduction and three workshops. These workshops help farm families agree on a vision for their future and develop an understanding of the planning process; focus on learning and using tools to develop the business plan and on building trust among members; and allow farm families to experience the practical nature of business plans through six meetings per year on member properties and an annual review. (Contains 15 references.) (TD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

Moving Beyond the Cutting Edge

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy

Chaffe R. F.

Dept. Natural Resources and Environment,
46 Aitken Street,
Alexandra,
Victoria 3714, Australia

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Robert F. Chaffe
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED 450 977

The normal distribution curve relating to the adoption of new practices in rural communities identifies the innovators at the cutting edge as being the top ten percent. To bring about effective response to change, community educators must move beyond the cutting edge to the majority. Such a move requires special skills which enable people to move from being a reactive follower to a person who is willing and able to choose their future, progressing from simple single solutions to the creation of a range of possibilities, any one of which may be the best at the time. In the jargon of the nineties they move from a 'win-lose' to a 'win-win or no deal' attitude. To equip the majority of farm families with these skills the Victorian Government in partnership with the Victorian Farmers Federation and the Federal Government have developed the Farm$mart project. The clear distinction this project has from others is its focus on farm families and the core task of establishing a mechanism for making and implementing decisions. Decisions that integrate the physical, financial and personal perspectives of the farm business. Farm$mart goes beyond the 'cutting edge' and is committed to reaching the majority of farm families with skills and knowledge combined with the opportunity to experience being in charge of their future. Farm$mart has had a difficult birth as it does not follow the norm expected of Government projects. To some it is seen as a threat, to others too hard and others too soft. This paper is the story of Farm$mart, how it evolved and how one group is applying adult learning best practices in rural communities.

1. Introduction

The 'Cutting Edge' is the place where the action starts, the place where the tool first meets the work. The shape and form of this edge determines the effectiveness of the tool as it starts work. To sustain the action of the tool we need the edge to be backed up with the best material, to keep the edge. But as well we need a tool that can be easily kept working at the right place to do the best job.

In adult learning terms we can sharpen the cutting edge with all the latest and greatest teaching and learning but if we fail to build skills, experience, knowledge and confidence into the area that will support the edge, the learning will soon be lost.

The innovators in our rural communities who are showing the way need the support of continuing information and education to keep their edge. However if we are to build a stronger more robust rural community energy needs to be put into the majority of the population to both sustain the cutting edge and encourage more use of the new and emerging knowledge and information.

We can talk about adoption or adaptation of best practice but the underlying issue is as educators we need to put energy into the process to best facilitate the sustained growth of the rural community through the development of skills, knowledge and experience in most members of the community.

The Victorian Farm$mart project has taken on this challenge and this paper focuses on the development and implementation of this project.

2. Background

The past two decades have seen considerable change in the rural communities of Australia.

The nation wide drought in 1982, culminating in a dust storm that turned day into night for the city of Melbourne, in the minds of many rural people marked the beginning of the end of the boom years for Australian Agriculture. The 1982 drought was followed by droughts, fires and floods in Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria and for the first time since the depression farm families began to walk off

RC 022780
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

their land. Blue green algae turned the Murray Darling river system toxic, large tracts of land were lost to production through salinisation, native forests were closed to timber production, a cap was placed on the amount of water available to agriculture in the Murray Darling basin and the clearing of native vegetation was heavily regulated. The wool industry had a major marketing problem which saw the failure of the wool price maintenance scheme. On a global scale and the primary industry commodity market fell as third world countries could deliver primary products at lower prices.

In the wider community the stock market and city based business crash in the late 1980's meant less investment in the rural sector both for business and life style, the closure of rural support industries like banks meant rural communities were no longer a major driving force in the Australia's social and political community.

The role of Government changed with a very strong push to a smaller public sector which lead to less direct support for rural industries. After the 1982 drought the federal government began a review of the way that government dealt with drought and other exceptional circumstances. The outcome of this review was the National Property Management Planning program (PMP).

The PMP program identified the need to build skills in the rural community to better manage the whole farm business including the need to more effectively manage change in the farm business, the personal changes needed to meet the new situations and to meet the demands of the environmental issues.

During the same period the Landcare program developed and the community began to demand land degradation repair, improved water quality and the greening of agriculture. The idea of natural products and sustainable use of resources has been confirmed by the 'Decade of Landcare' and the establishment of the 'Natural Heritage Trust'.

The PMP program began in 1993. In Victoria the program is delivered through the Farm$mart project.

3. Farm$mart

The challenge was how to go about the process of building the capacity in rural communities to be proactive about change. Farm$mart began with a risk management model where the elements of natural resources, financial planning and control, enterprise, marketing, self (family & staff), mission - goals - objectives were depicted as bounded by risk and information management. The model was developed through a number of modules that expanded each of the elements. This part of the project ran for three years and the evaluation of its performance concluded that the modules were disjointed, the outcomes expected in the community were not being achieved and that the projects focus was not clear.

In 1996 the Farm$mart team began to review the project and build a process that would deliver viable and sustainable agricultural industries, enhanced by farmers building their skills in managing natural, human and financial resources. The expected outcomes of the Farm$mart project were defined as:

- An increased awareness by Victorian farmers of the need for self reliance in managing their business and skill development needs.
- An increased demand for, and access to, adult learning by farmers.
- Improved integrated planning and management by farmers.
- Increased use of strategies to minimise the impact of risk on the achievement of family and business goals.
- Improved co-operation between government, training providers, agribusiness and farmers in developing and implementing the program.

The transformation in the way Farm$mart would deliver these outcomes required a major review of how the program is delivered to rural communities.

4. Paradigms explored

4.1 Focus on the individual

The team went back to the basic concepts expounded by Malcolm Knowles where he not only made the distinction between learning and teaching but he highlighted the concept of 'Learner Centred Learning'. Knowles confirmed learning as comprising three parts being the development of skills, knowledge and experience with the individual at the centre of the learning.

4.2 Convention in agricultural extension

The area of agriculture extension was also reviewed, and at the Future Agriculture Technology and Resource Conservation Symposium held Washington DC USA in 1982 many papers challenged the wisdom of extension based at reaching the 'innovators' and relying on the 'Trickle Down Effect' to reach the 'early adopters', the 'majority' and perhaps the 'laggards' in the rural community. The outcome was that the 'trickle down effect' was not the best way to deliver effective extension.

4.3 What were the innovators doing well?

When the team looked around the community it found that programs like 'Farm Management 500' (FM500) were not only encouraging the best farmers to participate but were achieving many of the changes that were required under the PMP program. A closer look at this group found that these farmers were the innovators, the risk takers and the farmers who were either highly skilled or worked hard to gain skills. The FM500 program also involved the farm family and built on the knowledge and experience of the group through regular peer review linked to a facilitator who worked with the group for some time.

The challenge was not that it worked but how can we learn from the program. The key issues emerging for the new program were:

- It must be learner centred.
- It will work best where farm families are involved.
- Working in a group which stays together for some time is most effective.
- Facilitation of the group requires special skills.
- There must be a clear focus or core to the project.
- Success is best where there is a clear strategy in place.
- Effective communication and trust within families and groups is critical for success.
- Confidence is a key element in making decisions.
- The fundamental driver in most relationships and businesses are the values held by the people in that business.
- The content must be linked to other learning experiences and outcomes.

4.4 Best practice in the wider community.

The conclusions drawn from the FM500 program were checked against some of the reference guiding modern business thinking.

Robert Fritz in his book 'Path of Least Resistance' discusses the issue of taking the tension out of decisions by looking for the deeper issues. He challenges us that rather than make the choice to give up smoking that we make the choice for a healthier body. Once we make the deeper choice it is easier to make decisions that can be sustained.

Stephen Covey in 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' identifies that to be effective we must deal with ourselves first to take charge of our lives and be proactive. Covey also raises the issue of moving from a dependence (the 'you' paradigm) through the independence (the 'I' paradigm) to interdependence (the 'we or our' paradigm) and doing so alerted the Farm$mart team to the importance of language. To be successful the PMP program had to be 'our' program.

Covey linked production with productive capacity and the need to keep them in balance. In doing so he also gave us the 'Quadrant II' paradigm where he linked productive capacity with the concept of prevention (against failure), relationship building, recognising new opportunities, planning and recreation. It is here that Covey explored the concept of 'Win -Win' or 'No Deal'.

Peter Senge in 'The Fifth Discipline' identifies success as being directly related to our ability to develop personal mastery, challenge our mental models, build shared visions, think in systems and develop and sustain team learning. Senge describes a learning organisation as one which puts these five disciplines into practice on an ongoing basis.

Laura Spencer in her 'Technology of Participation' identifies clearly the art and science of good facilitation. The seamless performance that encourages all members of a group to participate but underpins this participation with a process that encourages dialogue and exchange of ideas with many possible best answers rather than debate and single right answers.

Harrison Owen in 'Spirit' and also in 'Riding the Tiger' does not attempt to challenge the complex nature of the chaos of the modern world but instead celebrates the chaos as opportunities and a natural part of the normal world. He then sets out a process that leads to an interactive learning organisation.

Owen describes a process which moves from reactive, to responsive, to proactive, to interactive and then to inspired development within an interactive learning organisation. Such organisations encourage features which Owen lists as 'high learning, high play, appropriate structure and control and a genuine sense of community'. Owen also introduces the concept of open space. Open space is the time during change when the individual's and / or the group's internal and external blaming and anger have been dealt with and the stories are told, a time when decisions can be made to change course or return to the old path way.

Agriculture Victoria in 1996 commissioned a study to benchmark sustainable practices in Agriculture. From the study emerged a concept that to be sustainable, management needs to include the farm business, the natural resource and the human or personal elements. These three key areas need to be dealt with as part of the whole system to gain sustainable outcomes.

5. The interpretation from the data collected

The solution to the puzzle had started to take form. The new Farm$mart would build on these learnings by:

- Have strategic planning as its core business
- Work with groups of farm families who choose to work together.
- Provide a framework for making decisions.
- Begin by addressing the needs of farm families.
- Have many places where individuals and groups are encouraged to tell their story
- Target those farm families who were not currently involved with programs like FM500
- Have a program that allows the development of skills, experience and knowledge of the core business and provide clear links with other education opportunities.
- Leave operational training to established providers.
- Develop a clear understanding of who will derive benefit from the project, the stakeholders.
- Recognise that the outcomes of the project are farm families and rural communities who have the ability to take charge of their future.
- Have established benchmarks on which both individual and normative evaluation can be based.
- Have a visible logic to the development and running of the program.
- Evaluation will be both for accountability to the stakeholders and for continuous improvement to best reflect best practice in education and rural community development.
- Employ experienced and quality facilitators who have a passion to deliver a quality program.

6. Farm$mart structure

The project in Victoria is managed by the State Steering Committee made up of representatives from the Victorian Farmers Federation and the Department of Natural Resources and Environment. It is delivered, on a regional basis by a team of skilled facilitators dedicated to the project. The delivery is assisted in each region by steering committees who represent the farming community and include people with special skills including adult education and extension.

7. The Farm$mart Product

The product is made of four parts, an introduction, workshop series A, workshop series B, and workshop series C.

7.1 Introduction - Farm$mart: Taking Charge of Our Future

The introduction aims to break down the confusion about the planning process and simplify it explaining how Farm$mart can help farming families plan their future. The introduction should take about 30 minutes. It features, active exercises and an explanation of principles.

7.2 Workshop Series A - Farm$mart: Laying Foundations for Our Future

Aims to help farming families agree on a vision for their future, understand their business better and

develop a good understanding of the planning process. It features three sessions to allow thinking time, challenging active exercises, emphasis on communication and defines strategic direction.

7.3 Workshop Series B - Farm$mart: Building Balanced Plans that Really Work

Explores the vision for the farming business and what it means, learning and using tools to develop the business plan further while recognising the need to continually plan. The features of the extendended series help farm families move from strategic to tactical, allowing time for analysis and discussion, and building trust amongst group members.

7.4 Group Meetings - Farm$mart: Staying on Track

Aims to allow farm families to experience the continuous and practical nature of a business plan, to practice the planning techniques, to use in-depth practical explorations of local farming businesses and their plans for the future. It features six meetings per year, intensive visits to members properties, discussion of a wide range of issues and has an annual strategic review.

8. Review

The program was trialled with a range of farming communities and with staff from the Victorian Farmers Federation and Department of Natural Resources and Environment. The feed back was most encouraging and can be summarised by the conclusions of the participants:

'An exciting future, worth the risk to invest in!'
'A useful product to offer to Victorian producers in all industries.'
'Just do it!'
'It's worth the effort.'
'Is this the one stop shop I am looking for?'
'We can develop a simple summary which has the full overview of the farm family business.'
'It's worth doing!'
'The stage is set to change farming, it is important that it does it well.'
'All working to common goals.'
'It would be the spring board for a new way of extension delivery.'
'Something that farmers need.'
'Program that provides an opportunity for learning.'

The revised Farm$mart project:

- Is learner centred.
- Involves farm families, including members of the family who may not live or work on the farm.
- Works with groups that stay together for some time.
- Is lead by a team of facilitators dedicated to the project.
- Is clearly focused on the strategic part of the farm family business plan.
- Works strategically with farm families and where possible uses existing providers to under take skill training and extend the project.
- Develops effective communication and the building trust within families and groups.
- Builds confidence in the participants to make the hard decisions.
- Is linked to other learning experiences and outcomes

9. Conclusions

Farm$mart has been evolving since 1993. It has not it right yet but it does have a plan to put into place the best practices in adult learning. The attempt to apply 'best practice' within the PMP program has required the key stakeholders to carefully consider the way they undertake their own business.

Lyn Sykes at the 1997 Australian Pacific Extension Network Conference in her after dinner speech challenged the participants to consider the real cost to rural communities if by increasing production by 18% you create a devorce. Farm$mart may not prevent the devorce or directly increase production but it can provide the skills, knowledge and experience for farm families to make more informed and sustainable decisions.

Farm$mart is committed to building rural communities who can take charge of their future be-

cause the rural people have access to the best skills and a program in which knowledge and experience is valued and developed. Recent participants in the 'two day course' said the things they found most useful were:

- Self analysis
- Communication
- Sharing of common problems and ideas
- Independent assessment practises
- The need to write down thoughts on paper.
- Reinforcement of communication requirements, thought requirements re; goals, vision, values
- Planning and strategy systems
- Benchmarking data -
- Explanations of goals as against vision and values
- Real evidence of improved group communication and cohesion
- Group discussion
- The variation of practical exercises and theory sessions which complemented each other
- Business planning, working towards a mission statement.

Farm$mart has changed direction and it seems to be on track, we have the best chance to meet the outcomes defined and assist in building proactive rural communities who can take charge of their future.

10. References

Behn E.E. Discussion. B.C. English, J.A. Maetzold, B. R. Holding and E. O. Heady (Eds) 1982 *Proceedings of the RCA Symposium: Future Agricultural Technology and Resource Conservation.* Washington D.C. pp 278-283. Ames, Iowa, The Iowa State University Press.

Buttle F.H. Discussion. B.C. English, J.A. Maetzold, B. R. Holding and E. O. Heady (Eds) 1982 *Proceedings of the RCA Symposium: Future Agricultural Technology and Resource Conservation.* Washington D.C. pp 269-275. Ames, Iowa, The Iowa State University Press.

Carlson J.E. Discussion. B.C. English, J.A. Maetzold, B. R. Holding and E. O. Heady (Eds) 1982 *Proceedings of the RCA Symposium: Future Agricultural Technology and Resource Conservation.* Washington D.C. pp 275-277. Ames, Iowa, The Iowa State University Press.

Covey S. (1990) Seven habits of highly effective people. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Es van J.C. Dilemmas in the soil and water conservation behaviour of farmers. B.C. English, J.A. Maetzold, B. R. Holding and E. O. Heady (Eds) 1982 *Proceedings of the RCA Symposium: Future Agricultural Technology and Resource Conservation.* Washington D.C. pp 238-253. Ames, Iowa, The Iowa State University Press.

Fritz R. (1984) The path of least resistance, learning to become a creative force in your own life. New York, Balintine books for Random House Inc.

Heffernan W.D. Assumptions of the adoption/diffusion model and soil conservation. B.C. English, J.A. Maetzold, B. R. Holding and E. O. Heady (Eds) 1982 *Proceedings of the RCA Symposium: Future Agricultural Technology and Resource Conservation.* Washington D.C. pp 254-269. Ames, Iowa, The Iowa State University Press.

Knowles M. (1973) The adult learner a neglected species. Houston, Texas: Gulf Publishing Company.

Nowak P.J. Adoption and diffusion of soil and water conservation practices. B.C. English, J.A. Maetzold, B. R. Holding and E. O. Heady (Eds) 1982 *Proceedings of the RCA Symposium: Future Agricultural Technology and Resource Conservation.* Washington D.C. pp 214-237. Ames, Iowa, The Iowa State University Press.

Osgood B. Moderator Work Group Report. B.C. English, J.A. Maetzold, B. R. Holding and E. O. Heady (Eds) 1982 *Proceedings of the RCA Symposium: Future Agricultural Technology and Resource Conservation.* Washington D.C. pp 283-293. Ames, Iowa, The Iowa State University Press.

Owen H. (1987) Spirit, transformation and development in organisations. Potomac, MD: Abbot Publishing

Owen H. (1991) Riding the tiger, doing business in a transforming world. Potomac, MD: Abbot Publishing

Senge P.M. (1992) The fifth discipline. United Kingdom, Century Press

Spencer L. J. (1989) Winning through participation, meeting the challenge of corporate change with the technology of participation. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hutt Publishing Company.

11. Acknowledgments

Rendell McGuckian Agricultural Consultants who assisted the development of the revised Farm$mart project.

The Victorian Farm$mart team who manage, test, trial and deliver the Farm$mart project.